

Towards Unity amidst Diversity in Early Childhood Education: Report and Reflection on the 10th PECERA International Conference

Betty Chan, Grace Choy*

Yew Chung Education Foundation

Abstract

Early childhood education professionals in the Asian Pacific regions are facing various diversities, including economic and social diversities, cultural diversities, diversities in religious beliefs or value systems, and diversities in early childhood teacher education and school administration. Despite the different areas of diversities, they are united with one goal, that is, providing quality education for the benefit of children that meet their developmental needs. The Chinese concept of “*He*” or Harmony is instrumental in understanding “unity in diversity”. Harmony presupposes the existence of differences. Early childhood education in the Asian Pacific regions can be different and yet harmonious. By sharing latest research and teaching experience among early childhood professionals in an international platform such as PECERA, they can be united by vigorously proven theories and the most effective pedagogies, and it is achieved in a supportive environment.

Keywords: Unity, Diversity, Harmony, PECERA

* Corresponding authors, bettyc@ycef.com, gracec@ycef.com

Introduction

Since its inauguration in 2000, Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA) is dedicated to the mission of “*disseminating and supporting research in early childhood education within the Pacific area*”. According to the Constitution (PECERA, 2001), specific aims of PECERA are listed as:

- (1) To provide an academic forum in the Pacific region for the development and dissemination of high quality research in early childhood education.
- (2) To facilitate cooperation and collaboration among researchers in the Pacific area working in the field of early childhood education.
- (3) To promote links between research and practice in early childhood education.
- (4) To raise the visibility and status of research in early childhood education in the Pacific region.

In order to achieve its mission, annual international conferences are held in different parts of Asia-Pacific regions. In 2009, the 10th PECERA International Conference was held at the University of the Philippines on 25 to 27 July 2009 in Manila with the theme of “Towards Unity Amidst Diversity in Early Childhood Education”.

Lifetime Honorary President of PECERA Prof. Bernard Spodek (2009) believed that the theme of “Towards Unity Amidst Diversity in Early Childhood Education” was most appropriate for PECERA as he pointed out:

“PECERA can also be characterized by unity and diversity. Participants come from different countries and cultures. The traditions of early education are also different. But they are unified by the search for increased quality of education for young children and by their view of the importance of research as a way of improving that quality.”

Prof. Spodek (2009) referred to two diversities in the countries of conference participants and in ECE traditions. He argued that what united this group of ECE researchers was a common goal of striving to provide quality education for children and a common belief in research as the means to achieve this goal. Similarly, in the Welcome Remarks, PECERA International President Prof. Won-Young Rhee (2009) suggested that PECERA provided a supportive international platform that can facilitate the sharing of research and practice to achieve “unity amidst diversity”.

With these stated aims in mind, this paper attempts to highlight and review the diverse works of ECE researchers presented at the 10th PECERA conference. This attempt may raise questions. First of all, what is the meaning of “Unity amidst Diversity” in the field of early childhood education research? How can Diversity be conceptualized in early childhood education?

Unity in Diversity

“Towards Unity amidst Diversity” can be a contentious topic. On the surface, focusing on diversity may pose a challenge to unity. In reality, recognizing diversity is a first step towards understanding differences in harmony. According to the *UNESCO World Report on Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue* (UNESCO, 2009), placing emphasis on “unity in diversity” is in fact acknowledging the shared humanity inherent in our differences.

With the accelerating rate of globalization, we cannot afford to ignore but recognize the increasing interactions between cultures, and the multiple diversities we are facing. Better knowledge of our differences leads to mutual understanding. Moving beyond a focus on differences is the opportunity for dialogue. Dialogue does not mean relinquishing the differences but simply remaining open-minded and sharing what we have in common.

The *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (UNESCO, 2002) stated that “*Cultural diversity ... is the common heritage of humanity and should be*

recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations". On the occasion of World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development on 21 May 2010, UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova stated that

"Each culture leaves its distinctive mark on the vast field of the cultures of the world. Together, they coexist, thus constituting the many facets of a single humanity, shimmering and diverse. Over time, cultures have intermingled and have cross-fertilized and enriched each other. Yet, faced with today's great challenges, and in terms of economic and human development, cultures have unequal opportunities and destinies." (Bokova, 2010)

Diversity and Education

How does this recognition of the importance of diversity relate to education? In the international arena, there is growing awareness of the link between diversity and education, and the importance of integrating the diverse needs of learners with diverse methods and contents into educational practices. There is a move towards "education **through** diversity" and "education **for** diversity" (UNESCO, 2009).

It has been widely accepted that human behavior is the function of the person and the environment (Lewin, 1951). In order to examine the various levels of diversity operating in early childhood education, Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993, 2004) social ecology model or bio-ecological theory may provide a framework for analysis about the contextual environments that individual children experience.

At the centre of the model is the child learner. Each child is under layers of influences. Diversity in the first layer of environment (Microsystem) refers to the interactions between the child learner and the immediate learning environments created by significant others such as teachers, families, doctors, and peers. The second layer of environment (Mesosystem) refers to the connections or inter-relationships between the learning environments created by significant others, for example, the reciprocal relationships between teachers and parents. The third layer of environment

(or Exosystem) is beyond the child learners and refers to the external environmental settings of significant adults that affect their capacity to care and educate children. For instance, education policy, teacher education, school administration, government support for child cares, community health services ... etc. It can also refer to the conditions that influence the well-being of significant adults in children's lives such as demands and stresses from work, and opportunities for development.

The fourth layer of environment (Macrosystem) refers to the broader contexts that affect the whole system. It can be subdivided into social and economic contexts, cultural beliefs and core values. Socio-political structure and economic development shape this broader context. Similarly, beliefs about ECE, how a child should be treated, and definition of competence are influenced by cultural values. Finally, all of the above environments are stringed by Chronosystem, which acknowledge the changes of these systems over time. It refers to the temporal dimension where socio-historical circumstances are taken into account. Diversities are evident in all of these layers of influences, and vary from region to region.

Based on Lewin's (1951) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) frameworks, the following categories of diversity are derived for the classification of ECE research topic in the present study. The categories are listed as follows:

- Category 1 The child learner
- Category 2 Interaction between the child learner and the immediate learning environment (e.g., provided by teachers, families or peers)
- Category 3 Inter-relationships between the immediate learning environments (e.g., interactions between teachers and parents, teachers and community)
- Category 4 Professional environments that influence ECE provision (e.g. teacher training, or school administration)
- Category 5 Broader social, economic, and cultural contexts values and beliefs

Category 6 Historical development and changes over time of various systems

PECERA provides a platform to encourage intercultural dialogue in terms of ECE research and practices. Hence, this paper aims to review the various categories of diversity shown in the conference presentations.

Chinese Concept of “He”

In terms of Unity, there are different interpretations. The Chinese concept of “He” (和) or Harmony is instrumental in understanding the theme of unity in diversity. In the Analects, Confucius regarded “He” as a criterion for being a *jun-zi* (君子) or an honourable and good person. Confucius said, 「君子和而不同, 小人同而不和。」《論語・子路篇13:23》. It means that *“Honourable people have harmony even though they may be very different from each other. Ignoble people may share a great deal in common, and yet they do not have harmony.”* (translated by the Yew Chung Culture Committee, 2006, p.203).

Harmony presupposes the existence of differences (Li, 2006). *“An honourable person would respect different opinions and be capable to work with different people in a harmonious way. The pre-requisite of harmony is the recognition of diversity. Today, true harmony in a community is based on the acceptance of diversity and differences among individuals. Confucius believed in harmony and diversity among people”* (Yew Chung Culture Committee, 2006, p.95-97).

Huntington (1996) argued that we have entered an era of conflict between civilizations, but Confucius’ belief of “different and yet harmonious” can be used for resolving potential conflicts that may exist among cultures (Tang, 2004; Yew Chung Culture Committee, 2006). Harmonious relationship implies mutual complement and support (Cheng, 1991).

In this sense, unity in diversity does not necessary mean coming to a consensus about a universal path of development in ECE. It is an acknowledgement of multiple

paths of development, given the diversities in historical, social, economic, and cultural contexts in the Asia-Pacific region. The concept of “Harmony” embraces “Unity amidst Diversity”. This paper argues that unity can be achieved through shared goals. The common goal for PECERA is providing quality education for the benefit of children that meet their developmental needs.

Research Questions

This paper explores the questions of:

- (1) How was the theme “Towards Unity amidst Diversity” conceptualized by invited presentations of Keynote Address, Plenary Sessions and Panel Discussions in the 2009 PECERA conference?
- (2) How diversity was shown in the participants, topics and research methodology of individual papers and posters presented at the 2009 PECERA conference?

Method

This review paper reports and reflects on the 10th PECERA conference in the light of its theme “Towards Unity Amidst Diversity in Early Childhood Education” and the PECERA stated aims.

Source of Data

A total of 216 papers were accepted for presentations (including 80 individual papers and 136 posters) at the 10th PECERA international conference, in addition to 14 invited presentations (i.e., one keynote address, 6 papers of plenary sessions and 7 papers of panel discussions). They were published in the Abstract Book of the 10th PECERA international conference. Five participants from Hong Kong attended different sessions of the conference to take and exchange notes. Handouts of pre-

sentations were collected.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is divided into two parts: The first part summarizes the major themes in the Keynote Address, Plenary Sessions and Panel Discussions, to investigate how “Unity amidst Diversity” was conceptualized in the invited presentations. The second part examines the diversities of participants, topics, and research methodology of individual papers and posters. Lewin’s and Bronfenbrenner’s theories were used as framework for analysis of topics. Two researchers compared their classifications and reached agreement.

Results

I. Invited Papers from Keynote Address, Plenary Sessions and Panel Discussions

According to the Keynote address, plenary sessions and panel discussions, the diversities that are faced by early childhood education professionals included:

- (1) Economic and social diversities,
- (2) Cultural diversities,
- (3) Diversities in religious beliefs or value systems,
- (4) Diversities in professional environments, and
- (5) Diversities in approaches to early childhood education.

Unity amidst economic and social diversities

Early childhood education provision in Asian Pacific countries can be quite different, depending on their economic and social development. Despite the rapid economic advancement of some countries in the region, Atty. Cyril Lubaton (2009) pointed out that there are still many children in Asia-Pacific suffering from poverty, having no access to education, being victims of violence and exploitation and suffer-

ing from corporal punishment. There are 1.27 billion children (half of Asia's children) living in poverty; many of them lack access to health, nutrition or educational opportunities. About 122.3 million of them are subjected to violence, exploitation, hazardous child labour, physical and psychological abuse.

Ambassador Preciosa Soliven (2009), Secretary General of UNESCO-Philippines, shared her dream. *"We dream of a world without violence, a world of justice and hope ... a dream may be fulfilled, especially in Asia-Pacific ... Children are like a flame, we, adults are the keepers of the flame. One day, the flame will light the destiny of our nations"*.

The goal of UNESCO is to exterminate poverty and provide quality "Education for All" (EFA), as specified in the Jomtien Declaration (UNESCO, 1990) and again in the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000). Specifically, by 2015, the first goal of the Dakar Framework is to expand early childhood care and education (UNESCO, 2006). Adults are the bridges to provide the appropriate environment. Early childhood professionals are united in providing the environment for self-creation of young children (Soliven, 2009). UNESCO and locals are working together in this direction to ensure equal access to education. In addition, they are also united in securing children's rights to build a culture of peace (Lubaton, 2009). This can be related to education that fosters the concept of "harmony" and respecting diversity. "Education for all" and "Education for diversity" become common goals amidst economic and social diversities in the region.

Unity amidst cultural diversities

Sumida (2009) used Nisbett's (2003) research to argue that Western and Eastern people have different cognitive styles, which influence their way of thoughts. Western culture tends to dichotomize the phenomenal world (natural world) and the mental world (world of ideas). Hence, their science activities tend to focus on analyzing factors that sustain life. Children are encouraged to keep detailed journal of the

growth of an insect. Japanese culture, on the other hand, does not distinguish between the natural world and the mental world; they encourage children to develop relationship with their natural environment and emphasize appreciation and respect of life in nature. Both approaches in science activities are conducive to children's learning as the cultural aspect is taken into consideration. Sumida (2009) argued that science activities should be culturally appropriate that match with their respective learning styles.

Similarly, Lynda Boyd (2009) from the University of Canterbury argued that respect for indigenous Maori culture was essential for providing culturally appropriate early childhood education in New Zealand. It is reflected officially in their national bicultural curriculum "*Te Whariki*" (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) and a series of bicultural assessment exemplars "*Kei Tua o te Pae*". All children are given the opportunity to develop an understanding of their cultural heritages. The English and Maori texts are arranged in parallel and they complement each other in the guidelines. Therefore, to achieve unity amidst cultural diversity, the goal of "Education through Diversity" should be upheld. It also means that teachers should be well trained in providing culturally appropriate practice.

Unity amidst diversities in religious beliefs and value systems

In order to make sense of this complex world, a variety of deep rooted ideological traditions, religious beliefs and value systems prevails in the Asia-Pacific region. As a generalization, for example, Islam is most prevalent in Malaysia and Indonesia as it is the national religion in these countries. Buddhism is featured in Thailand. Australia and New Zealand are founded on Christianity. Other dominant ideologies such as Confucianism and Daoism are influential in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Within each value system, there are also different interpretations or denominations. Moreover, in certain countries many religions coexist (for instance, Shinto and Buddhism co-exist in Japan) and in others, adherents are affiliated to more

than one religion.

Despite variations in religious faith and values, it is possible to identify the communality and relatively universal core values among different religions. Archea (2009), retired Bishop of the United Methodist Church, argued that every faith community affirmed the rights and importance of children. Interfaith Network can serve as a common forum for experience sharing. He further suggested that through inter-faiths dialogues, early childhood professionals can be united with a common concern in children's holistic development and character formation. He believed that "wholeness" encompassed three inter-related dimensions:

- (1) Internal or inward dimension: all children are entitled to the basic rights to education, health, and identity.
- (2) Horizontal dimension: children's relationships with other human beings and the environment should be fostered.
- (3) Vertical dimension: children's relationship to the non-material aspects of life such as beliefs and value systems should also be nurtured.

When the three dimensions are integrated, a person's "human-ness" is complete.

Hence, early childhood professionals are united in a common concern to defend the rights of children to be human beings. *"Children are God's gifts to us. Our duty is to safeguard, protect and promote them, let's not betray their trust"* (Archea, 2009).

Unity amidst diversities in professional environments

Policies related to early childhood teacher education and school administration in Thailand, Korea, New Zealand and Hong Kong were reviewed in their respective systems (Boyd, 2009; Chan, Lee & Choy, 2009; Hemchayat, 2009; Lee, 2009). Issues accompanying the government initiative on early childhood education reform were also shared by Japanese scholar (Fukada, 2009). Different regions shared some com-

monalities and experienced various differences. In the review on teacher education and school administrations, a sense of historical development was evident in various papers.

For a long history, both Korea (Lee, 2009) and Hong Kong (Chan, Lee & Choy, 2009) separated kindergartens and child-care centres with different jurisdictions, target age groups, teacher qualification requirements and funding sources. Harmonization in Hong Kong had just been introduced in 2005. Hemchayat (2009) of Thailand's Chulalongkorn University suggested that the stronger the belief in developing teacher education of the country, the more quality of its citizens. If all parties work hand-in-hand with a whole-hearted agreement on teacher education, it will lead to a hundred ways of balancing all diversities. All governments in these regions are making efforts to provide quality early childhood education through reforms in teacher education and school administration. In this way, they are united in providing quality care and education for the younger generation.

Unity amidst diversities in approaches to early childhood education

Soliven (2009) also reviewed preschool education in different countries, including Israeli Kibbutz, Japanese mother's storytelling program, Indonesian play school "Taman Kanak", as well as French, Danish and British preschools. Each approach has its own characteristics that meet the needs of a particular country. Although different ECE approaches were adopted (Spodek, 2009), she found a global trend that for 3-4 year olds, they tend to be play-oriented whereas for 5-year-olds, they tend to be academically-oriented. She emphasized that, as keepers of the flame, adults need to cultivate children's natural self-creation. Influenced by Montessori tradition, she suggested that "*All young children have an absorbent mind, they are independent learner in the process of "becoming"*", and the energy of self-creation was the most marvelous manifestation of life. A child-centered approach was the common thread that links different ECE approaches.

Summary of invited presentations

In summary, invited presentations tended to provide a Macro-perspective of diversities in early childhood education, with strong emphasis on the broader economic, social, cultural, religious, and values diversities that influenced ECE provision. They also covered the specific ECE professional environments and the different approaches to ECE. Despite the different areas of diversities, they demonstrated a consensus that early childhood professionals were united with one goal, that is, providing quality education for the benefit of children that meet their developmental needs. It can be concerted efforts in combating poverty and inequitable access to education, recognizing the rights of children, providing quality education through teacher education and school administration reforms, developing culturally appropriate practices, or providing child-centred holistic education.

II. Individual Papers and Posters

Individual papers and posters were examined according to the country of presenters, topics, relative emphasis on theory and practice, and research methodology.

Diversity in countries of participants and presenters

At the 10th conference, participants came from fifteen countries or regions, including Korea, Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, United States, Egypt, Turkey, and Botswana. The participation of researchers from various countries had already echoed the theme of the conference as they were unified with the pursuit and dissemination of early childhood education research.

The distribution of countries of individual papers and posters accepted for presentations is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Countries of accepted individual papers and posters for the 10th PECERA international conference*

Countries of accepted papers	Frequency	Percentage
Australia	3	1.39%
Botswana ¹	1	0.46%
China	5	2.31%
Hong Kong	4	1.85%
Indonesia	2	0.93%
Japan	8	3.70%
Korea	101	46.76%
New Zealand	1	0.46%
The Philippines	20	9.26%
Singapore	2	0.93%
Taiwan	63	29.17%
Thailand	1	0.46%
Turkey ¹	2	0.93%
USA	1	0.46%
Joint papers ²	2	0.93%
Total	216	100%

Note. ¹ Beyond Asia-Pacific countries.

² One joint paper was conducted by researchers in Korea and USA, and the other was from the Philippines and Australia.

It was encouraging to note that ECE researchers from Turkey and Botswana had chosen PECERA as the platform for result dissemination. Korean researchers had 101 papers got accepted for presentations at the PECERA conference and they accounted for 47% of total acceptance, suggesting a strong support from Korea. Researchers from Taiwan shared a proportion of 29% and the host country of the Philippines had a proportion of 9% paper acceptance. Papers from the above three countries accounted for 85% of the total number of presentations. About 1% of the paper was joint collaborations between two countries. Submissions from a more diverse spread of Asia-Pacific countries and more joint papers conducted by several countries would be desirable.

Diversity in topic

Table 2 presented the topics of individual papers and posters, using Lewin's and Bronfenbrenner's theories as analytic framework. The relative proportion on each category reflected the concerns of early childhood education researchers.

Table 2. *Category of topics in individual papers and posters accepted for the 10th PECERA Conference*

Category of topics	Frequency	Percentage
1. The child learner	20	9.26%
2. Interactions between the child learner and the learning environments	52	24.07%
3. Inter-relationships between the learning environments	6	2.78%
4. Professional environments (including connections between professional environments and learning environments)	71	32.87%
5. Broader social, economic and cultural contests, values and beliefs (including their connections with child learner, learning environments, or professional environments)	38	17.59%
6. Historical developments of various systems	2	0.93%
7. Multiple categories	37	12.50%
Total	216	100%

Overall, ECE researchers were most interested in specific approaches that improve the provision of early childhood education. Investigations on professional environments (e.g., preschool administrators working for school improvement) and its connections with the learning environments were the major concern of most researchers. It comprised of 33% of papers accepted. It was followed by papers investigating the interactions between the child learners and the learning environments (e.g., establishing environment to lessen classroom conflicts). It consisted of 24% of papers accepted. Focus on child learners interested 9% of researchers. Surprisingly, few studies (3%) examined the interactions between different learning environments (e.g., model of home and school partnership). Together, they accounted

for 69% of all individual papers and posters accepted.

On the other hand, the broader social, economic and cultural contexts, and their influences on the child learners, the learning environments and the professional environments comprised 18% of papers. The historical development of various systems accounted for 1%. About 12.5% papers studied multiple categories with diverse concerns (e.g., building and understanding philosophy of teaching through childhood memories), indicating the complexity of research topics in the papers accepted.

Diversity in relative emphasis on theory and practice

The relative focus on theory and practice of the accepted papers is presented in Table 3. Seventy-three percent of the accepted papers were theory-focused (e.g., strategic vision and mission framework analysis for kindergarten). Such papers tended to focus on model building and policy analysis. About 13% of accepted papers were practical-focused papers (e.g., guideline of preschool mathematics education). These papers tended to concentrate on pedagogy and how to improve children's learning and teaching environments. About 14% research balanced theory with practice by linking the two in the studies (e.g., improving evidence based practice in ECE based on neuroscience and child development research). This type of papers applied theories to actual teaching environments and evaluated its effectiveness in applied settings.

Table 3. *Relative focus on theory and practice in papers and posters accepted for the 10th PECERA Conference.*

Focus of research	Frequency	Percentage
Theoretical	157	72.69%
Practical	28	12.96%
Balance focus on theory and practice	31	14.35%
Total	216	100%

Diversity in Research Methodology

The research methodology adopted by individual papers and posters were classified and presented in Table 4. About 40% of research was conducted by qualitative methodology such as observations, interviews, documentations, and case study ... etc., whereas 29% of research used quantitative methodology including questionnaires and standardized rating scales ... etc. About 8% of research used a mixed method of both qualitative and quantitative strategies. This result may point to a need for more research conducted with mixed method in the future.

Table 4. *Research methodologies of papers and posters accepted for the 10th PECERA Conference.*

Research methodology	Frequency	Percentage
Qualitative	86	39.81%
Quantitative	62	28.70%
Mixed qualitative and quantitative method	18	8.33%
Unspecified	50	23.15%
Total	216	100%

Summary of individual paper and poster presentations

To summarize, individual papers and posters from various countries demonstrated diversities in their selection of research topics, relative emphasis on theory and practice, and research methodology. The majority of individual papers and posters tended to analyze from micro-perspective, focusing on immediate learning environments, and external professional environments that affect significant adults in creating quality early childhood education. It can be argued that despite the diversities, the conference presenters were united in a common belief in research as the means to achieve the common goal of providing quality education for the benefits of children.

Discussion

Regarding the first Research Question of how the theme “Towards Unity amidst Diversity” was conceptualized by invited presentations; it can be discussed in various levels. Unity can be interpreted based on the Chinese concept of “*He*” or Harmony. First of all, one have to acknowledge that there are multiple pathways of development to unity, given the social, economic, cultural and value diversities in the Asia-Pacific region. There is no universally accepted “one-size-fit-all” strategy. One way of achieving unity in diversity is through commitment to a shared goal.

On economic and social diversities, the focus of early childhood education in developed and developing countries could be quite different. Both Soliven (2009) and Lubaton (2009) highlighted the influence of economic development and social context on early education provision. Unity amidst economic and social diversities can be achieved by commitment to the goals of “Education for All” (UNESCO, 2006) and “Education for Diversity” (UNESCO, 2009). Education is powerful as it plays a crucial role in contributing to a more just, equitable and peaceful world (Maclean, 2010). By ensuring equal access to early childhood education, respecting and validating multiple identities of the child learners, ECE professionals would contribute to promote peace and uphold human dignity.

With regards to cultural diversities, Japanese scholar Sumida (2009) pointed out the different cognitive styles between Western and Eastern cultures, whereas Lynda Boyd (2009) of New Zealand argued for respecting indigenous culture and its implication for a bicultural early childhood curriculum. The common goal for achieving Unity amidst cultural diversities is “Education through Diversity” (UNESCO, 2009). Cultural differences should be embraced, whether it is differences in languages, cognitive styles, learning styles or cultural heritages. Culturally appropriate practice is essential in early childhood education.

Various countries are characterized by different religious beliefs or value systems within the Asian Pacific regions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and domi-

nant ideologies such as Confucianism and Daoism. Despite this, early childhood professionals can be united with a common goal in nurturing children's holistic development and character formation through inter-faiths dialogues (Arichea, 2009) and value education. To this end, UNESCO has identified the core values for developing innovative practice for value education toward international understanding and a culture of peace. UNESCO has formulated three pillars of educational program for the 21st century (Soliven, 2009). They are:

1. *Learning to BE*—a holistic and integrated approach to values education for human development (UNESCO, 2002),
2. *Learning to DO*—values for learning and working together in a globalised world—(UNESCO, 2005), and
3. *Learning to LIVE together in harmony and peace*—values education for peace, human rights, democracy and sustainable development for the Asian Pacific region (UNESCO, 1998).

These educational programs may shed lights on how to achieve unity in diversity through value education.

With regards to diversities in professional environments, there are differential developments in various Asian Pacific countries such as New Zealand, Hong Kong, Thailand and Korea (Boyd, 2009; Chan, Lee & Choy, 2009; Hemchayat, 2009; Lee, 2009). Amidst diversities in professional environments, governments and early childhood professionals are united and committed to improve early childhood teacher education and school administration as they are keys to quality ECE provision.

On diversities in approaches to early childhood education, Soliven (2009) reviewed preschool education in different countries, from Israeli Kibbutz to Indonesian play school “Taman Kanak”. A common thread that link different approaches to early childhood education is child-centredness.

There are multiple ways to answer the question of how to achieve unity amidst diversity. The invited presentations were all concerned about the goal of providing quality education for the benefit of children that meet their developmental needs.

Regarding the second Research Question on individual papers and posters, diversity was shown in the countries of participants, research topics, relative emphasis on theory and practice, and research methodology. While invited presentations tended to adopt macro-perspective addressing cultural, economic and social diversities, individual papers and posters tended to analyze from micro-perspective addressing environments more directly related to ECE provision. Early childhood research could be balanced with both macro- and micro-perspectives.

In light of the first specific PECERA objective *to provide an academic forum to disseminate research in early childhood education*, the annual conference indeed attracted submissions from various countries to disseminate their research findings. While the majority of the conference papers concentrated on a few countries, many factors affected paper submission in the region. For example, the global financial tsunami hit the world from September to November in 2008; it may affect the turn-out rate of participants in 2009. Broader economic factors need to be acknowledged.

Nonetheless, it may be time for PECERA to act proactively in attracting more Asian Pacific countries to submit papers. PECERA could target countries which have not previously joined in any of the PECERA conference. This objective may have a reciprocal relationship with the fourth objective of PECERA, i.e., *to raise the visibility and status of ECE research in the Pacific region*. With a raised profile of ECE research in the region, the first objective could be attained more easily, and vice versa.

In light of the second objective *to facilitate cooperation and collaboration among researchers in the Pacific area working in ECE*, it is hopeful that more joint papers conducted by collaborations between two or more Asia-Pacific countries will be sub-

mitted in subsequent conferences. At the 10th conference, there were two joint papers of collaborations between Korea and USA, and between the Philippines and Australia.

PECERA could be an excellent platform for researchers from Asia-Pacific region to explore and discuss joint endeavors. The listing of research interests of members on the PECERA website is very useful. To further consolidate the network, one suggestion is to group presenters of similar topics or research interests together in the presentations, regardless whether it is paper or poster presentations, and designate a convener and additional time for discussion among the group. Researchers with similar research interests may come up with joint projects during discussion session.

In light of the third objective *to promote links between research and practice in ECE*, different research methodology can be considered. The majority of the papers adopted a qualitative methodology in their conduct of research. As the world trend is leaning towards mixed methods, it could be encouraged among ECE researchers. One possibility is to conduct Pre-conference Methodology Workshops such as “Mixed methods in ECE” in future meetings. Stronger emphasis could be placed on research that link theory with practice as the majority of paper accepted was theory-focused. Specially, future workshops can be organized to target skills-building in early childhood education.

In light of the fourth objective *to raise the visibility and status of ECE research*, it would be beneficial to turn individual conference papers and posters into publications in the PECERA journal. Some journals encourage paper submission from non-English speaking countries by providing extra support on English writing. This may be a suggestion for the editorial board of *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education* to consider.

Prof. Rhee (2009) mentioned that compared to the discipline of Child Development, Health and Psychology, there is a long hard way for early childhood education to develop. Indeed, comparatively speaking, the professional field of early childhood education is relatively new, especially in developing countries. Although the emer-

gence and formalization of early childhood provision can be traced back to 19th century in Europe and North American, ECE was taken seriously by developing countries only in recent decades, typically began in the 1970s (UNESCO, 2006). Considerable diversity was also demonstrated in the development of ECE within Asia-Pacific region (Kamerman, 2000). Now, as a new emerging group of researchers, we are proud of the rapid development of ECE profession in the past decades. It is high time to consolidate the shared goal and develop a collective identity of ECE researcher.

As an international platform, PECERA can facilitate the sharing of vigorously proven theories and the most effective pedagogies among early childhood professionals. Rhee (2009) believed that because “*We have a dream, a dream of unity*”, Asia-Pacific ECE researchers are committed to achieve “unity amidst diversity”, and it is achieved in a supportive environment.

This review and reflection paper was limited to the analysis of the 10th PECERA conference presentations. Future study could compare and review more empirical data from various international PECERA conferences and subject the analysis to more vigorous research methodology. PECERA represents a new group of emerging ECE researchers. This paper aims to provoke further thoughts on “Towards Unity amidst Diversity in ECE” and the current state of research in PECERA.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to specially thank Deputy Director of Yew Chung Education Foundation Ms Priscilla Yeung, Head of the Office of Directorate Mrs Winnie Kwong, and Education Officer Ms Lancy Ho for their contribution in this paper, and the research assistance by Ms Sai-Fun Leung and Ms Wynne Tong.

References

- Arichea, D. (July, 2009). *Children's rights and spiritual development*. Plenary Session presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.
- Bokova I. (May, 2001). *World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development*. Retrieved on May 21, 2010 from http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=40950&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- Boyd, L. (July, 2009). *Developing an awareness of Indigenous issues in undergraduate teacher education students –a New Zealand study*. Presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1993). The ecology of cognitive development: Research models and fugitive findings. In R. H. Wozniak & K. Fischer (Eds.). *Scientific environments* (pp.3-44). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2004). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. London: Sage Publications.
- Chan, B., Lee, M. & Choy, G. (2009). Competing Forces: Government Policy, Teacher Education, and School Administration in Hong Kong Early Childhood Education. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 3 (1), 75-86.
- Cheng, Chung-ying (1991). *New Dimension of Confucian and Neo-Confucian Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fukada, S. (July, 2009). *Current attempts to reform Japanese early childhood education and its bitter result*. Plenary Session presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.

- Hemchayat, W. (July, 2009). *Teacher education in Thailand*. Presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Touchstone.
- Kamerman, S. B. (2000). Early childhood education and care: an overview of developments in the OECD countries. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 33 (1), 7-30.
- Lee, Yong-Ja (July, 2009). *Early Childhood Teacher Education and School Administration System in Korea*. Presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science: Selected theoretical papers*. D. Cartwright. New York: Harper & Row.
- Li, Chen-yang (2006). The Confucian Ideal of harmony. *Philosophy East and West*, 56 (4), 583-603.
- Lubaton, C. (July, 2009). *Building a Culture of Peace: A call to end violence and corporal punishment on children*. Plenary Session presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.
- Maclean, R. (May, 2010). *Power of Education: Lifelong Learning for Sustainable Development, Peace Building and the End of Poverty*. Public Lecture presented at the Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong.
- New Zealand Ministry of Education (1996). *Te Whàriki: He Whàriki Màtauranga mò ngà Mokopuna o Aotearoa/Early Childhood Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Nisbett, R. E. (2003). *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... And Why?* New York: The Free Press.
- PECERA (2001). *Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA)*

Constitution. Christchurch: PECERA.

Rhee, Won-Yong (July, 2009). *Welcome Remarks by PECERA International President*. Presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.

Soliven, P. S. (July, 2009). *Do global ECE systems recognize infants' self-creation?* Presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.

Spodek, B. (2009). Welcome Message. In *Abstract book of the 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA)*, Manila: PECERA.

Sumida, M. (July, 2009). *Cultural fusion of Japanese view of nature and Western view of nature in early childhood education*. Plenary Session presented at 10th annual conference of Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), Manila, the Philippines.

Tang, Y. (2004). "Clash" or "Coexistence" of Civilizations? Beijing Forum. Retrieved on December 18, 2008 from <http://www.beijingforum.org/en/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=270&Page=1>

UNESCO (1990). *World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Need (Jomtien Declaration)*. New York: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2000). *The Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments*. Paris: UNESCO publishing.

UNESCO (2002). *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO (2006). *Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2007: Strong foundations-Early childhood care and education*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

UNESCO (2009). *UNESCO World Report on Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*. Luxembourg: UNESCO.

UNESCO-APNIEVE (1998). *Learning to Live Together in Peace and Harmony*:

Values Education for Peace, Human Rights, Democracy, and Sustainable Development for the Asia-Pacific Region. A UNESCO-APNIEVE Sourcebook for Teacher Education and Tertiary Level Education. Bangkok: UNESCO.

UNESCO-APNIEVE (2002). *Learning to Be: A Holistic and Integrated approach to Values education for Human Development.* A UNESCO-APNIEVE Sourcebook No.2 for Teachers, Students and Tertiary Level Instructors. Bangkok: UNESCO.

UNESCO-APNIEVE (2005). *Learning to Do: Values for learning and working together in a globalized world.* A UNESCO-APNIEVE Sourcebook No.3 for Trainers, Teachers and Students in the Area of Technical and Vocational Education and Training. Bonn, Germany: UNESCO.

Yew Chung Culture Committee (ed.) (2006). *The Analects: A Modern Translation and Contemporary Interpretation.* Hong Kong: Yew Chung Publishing House.